DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 211 866 CG 015 658

AUTHOR Madden, Margaret E.; Carli, Linda
TITLE Students' Satisfaction With Graduate School and Attributions of Control and Responsibility.
PUB DATE Apr 81
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association (52nd, New York, NY, April 22-25 1981). Best copy available.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attribution Theory; Graduate School Faculty; *Graduate Students; Graduate Study; Higher Education; *Individual Power; Locus of Control; Social Psychology; *Student Attitudes; Student College Relationship; *Student Teacher Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Blame; *Satisfaction

ABSTRACT

The faculty of graduate programs are often concerned with factors associated with students' successful completion of graduate school. Causal attributions are one type of perception relevant to satisfaction with graduate school, and attribution theory suggests other variables that may affect graduate student satisfaction. The relationships among perceived personal control, blame of others, and satisfaction were explored for a sample of 57 students from 23 social psychology graduate programs. Subject responses to a questionnaire revealed that satisfaction with graduate school was positively correlated with perceived personal control. Satisfaction and control were positively associated with faculty respect for students and negatively associated with students' blame of faculty for problems. The results suggest specific program factors which appear to influence students' satisfaction with graduate school, including that the amount of structure in the graduate program is negatively correlated with satisfaction. Additionally, the students' perceptions of how faculty evaluate them and the frequency of their interaction with other students and faculty are positively correlated with both control and satisfaction and negatively correlated with blame of the faculty. (Author/NRB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED211866

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Students' satisfaction with graduate school and attributions of control and responsibility.

Margaret E. Madden and Linda Carli

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Paper presented at the 52nd Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, New York, New York, April, 1981.

CG 015658

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Margaret Madden

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Students' satisfaction with graduate school and attributions of control and responsibility.

Margaret E. Madden and Linda Carli
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Abstract

In a survey of graduate students in social psychology programs, it was found that satisfaction with graduate school is positively correlated with perceived personal control. Satisfaction and control are positively associated with faculty respect for students and negatively associated with students' blame of faculty for problems.

The faculty of graduate programs are often concerned with factors associated with students' successful completion of graduate school. As funds for graduate support become tighter, the need to reduce attrition from graduate programs will probably become more important so that available funds will not be "wasted" on students who do not finish their programs.

Most research concerning students' success in graduate programs has focused on what admission criteria best predict either completion of programs or success measured by several means (i.e., graduate grade point average or faculty ratings). For instance, in doctoral programs in psychology and other fields, peoples' undergraduate grade point average (GPA) predicts their graduate school GPA, but does not predict whether they attain the Ph.D. (Hackman, Wiggins, & Bass, 1970; Rawls, Rawls, & Harrison, 1969; Willingham, 1974); whereas GRE scores and peer and self-ratings during the first year of graduate school do predict attainment of the doctorate (Hackman et al., 1970; Wiggins, Blackburn, & Hackman, 1969; Willingham, 1974). In master's degree programs in applied psychology and nursing, graduate GPA is also moderately correlated with undergraduate GPA (Federici & Schuerger, 1974; Sime, 1978). These studies involve student characteristics that are identified before admission into graduate school or during the first year of a graduate program. The predictive value of these factors is

moderate at best, however, and their use has not addressed the need to maximize the percentage of students who complete graduate programs.

Rather than focusing on student characteristics, then, perhaps educators should consider program variables that contribute to students' attainment of their graduate degrees. There has been very little research on such program variables. A few researchers have examined students' perceptions of their graduate experiences in clinical psychology programs (O'Hare & Grounds, 1978; Walker, 1977). Derry and Brandenburg (1978) used factor analysis to isolate four factors contributing to undergraduate and graduate students' satisfaction with their major programs. Students' perceptions of the personal value of their programs and their satisfaction with instruction, f[illegible] mentorship, and the department, contributed to their overall satisfaction with their programs. None of these studies include a theoretical interpretation of the findings concerning students' graduate school experiences, however.

Causal attributions are one type of perception relevant to satisfaction with graduate school and attribution theory suggests variables that may affect graduate student satisfaction. Attribution research has shown that perceptions of personal control are associated with adaptive coping and satisfaction with a variety of life experiences (e.g., Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Langer & Rodin, 1976; Wortman & Brehm, 1975). Perceptions of control may influence satisfaction directly because people prefer situations in which they have control (e.g., Wortman, Panciera, Shusterman, & Hibischer, 1976), or indirectly because people who believe that they have control will manipulate their situations in order to make them satisfying (e.g., Wortman, 1976).

Perceptions of control are also related to other kinds of attributions. Recent evidence indicates that blaming others for problems is associated with reduced feelings of control and low satisfaction (Madden & Janoff-Bulman,

in press). Wives who blamed their husbands for past marital conflict believed that they had less control over future resolution of conflicts and were less satisfied with their marriages than wives who did not blame their husbands for past marital conflict. Thus it appears that blaming others for a problem is indicative of feelings of lack of control over its solution, as well as dissatisfaction with the situation.

Characteristics of the graduate student's role may create feelings of lack of control. Although students are adult in age and often have adult responsibilities, they are still dependent on faculty members for the direction of their professional careers. Graduate students are no longer semi-adolescent undergraduates, but they are not yet genuine professionals able to earn their own keep. They often experience the conflict and dissatisfaction associated with the transition between roles (e.g., Rossi, 1968). They are also usually subject to continual supervision and evaluation by faculty members. Thus graduate students may feel that they lack control over their lives, especially relative to non-students their own age.

The degree of perceived lack of control might well vary with some characteristics of the particular prgram a student is in. For instance, some programs are more structured than others and allow students little input into program requirements; students in highly structured programs may feel that they have less control over decisions affecting their careers than students in relatively unstructured programs. Personal characteristics of faculty members may also affect students' feelings of control. For example, some professors allow students self direction in their work, while others may not. Factors such as program structure or faculty characteristics may affect student satisfaction. Therefore, students may well blame faculty for problems reducing their satisfaction with graduate school either with or without justification. Given the association among perceived personal control, blaming others, and satisfaction (Madden & Janoff-Bulman,

in press), the present study tested the hypotheses that high satisfaction with graduate school is related to high perceived personal control, and that low satisfaction is related to blaming others for problems.

Because the investigators are social psychologists with a personal interest in how social psychology students view their programs, students in doctoral programs in social psychology were asked to respond to a questionnaire regarding their attributions about and satisfaction with their graduate programs.

Method

Subjects

A list of the graduate students in 23 social psychology programs was used to make up the sample of participants.[1] For programs having fewer than seven students, all of the individuals in the program were contacted by mail and asked to participate. For each of the larger programs, six students were randomly chosen to be in the sample. Of the 100 students who were sent questionnaires, 33 men and 24 women replied. At least one student from each program responded. Thus 57 respondents composed the final sample for the study.

Procedure

Each student received a cover letter and questionnaire. The experimenters explained in the letter that the study involved students' perceptions of their graduate training. Participants were asked to respond to the questionnaire anonymously and to send a request for the results of the study, if desired, in a separate letter to preserve their anonymity. No deceptions were involved.

On the first part of the questionnaire, participants gave background information on their program and themselves, indicating their age, gender, and year in graduate school; the number of students and faculty in their program; the number of required courses in their program; whether the Master's theses, comprehensive examination, or Doctoral dissertation were required; the type of job they desired; and the amount and type of funding they had.

The second part of the questionnaire dealt with students' perceptions of their program. On nine-point bipolar scales, participants rated how structured their program was; how much input graduate students had in determining their program requirements; how satisfied they were in their performance in graduate school, with their interactions with faculty, and with their interactions with other students; how responsible each of several factors were for problems creating dissatisfaction (i.e., faculty, the participants themselves, and other students); how much control they had over their success in their work, their interactions with faculty, and their interactions with students; how frequently they interacted with faculty and students; whether they felt that faculty in their program generally regarded students as competent; whether they felt that faculty regarded students as colleagues; how satisfied they were with their experiences in graduate school; and how satisfied they were compared to other students in their program.

Results

An overall measure of satisfaction was obtained by summing participants' ratings of how satisfied they were compared to other students, and their ratings of satisfaction with their performance in graduate school, interactions with faculty, and interactions with other students. Responsibility ratings

for problems causing dissatisfaction with performance in graduate school, interactions with faculty, and interactions with other students were combined to yield overall measures of responsibility attributed separately to faculty, the respondents themselves, and to other students. Participants' ratings of control over success in their work and their interactions with faculty and students were summed to provide a general measure of perceived control. The extent to which the programs had flexible or rigid requirements was indexed by summing participants' ratings of how structured their program was, how much input they had in determining course requirements, and how many courses were required. A variable measuring the faculty members' evaluation of their graduate students was obtained by combining ratings of how satisfied faculty were with students, the extent to which faculty treated students as colleagues, and how much competence faculty felt that students possessed.

Participants reported being somewhat satisfied with their overall graduate school experience ($\underline{M}$ = 5.82). They attribute responsibility for problems to themselves (M = 4.81) and to faculty ($\underline{M}$ = 4.29) equally ($\underline{t}(47)$ =1.66), but more than to other students ($\underline{M}$ = 2.93; self vs. other students, $\underline{t}(45)$ = 7.75, $\underline{p}<.001$; faculty vs. other students, $\underline{t}(45)$ =5.53, $\underline{p}<.001$). They report having a lot of control over their successes ($\underline{M}$ = 6.33). They interact frequently with faculty and other students ($\underline{M}$ = 6.33) and receive moderately favorable evaluations by faculty ($\underline{M}$ = 6.01). (See Table 1.)

A correlational analysis was performed on the data (see Table 2). Satisfaction was correlated with perceived control, $\underline{r}(55)$ = .50, $\underline{p}<.001$, frequency of interaction with faculty and other students, $\underline{r}(55)$ = .56, $\underline{p}<.001$, and evaluations of students by faculty, $\underline{r}(55)$ = .59, $\underline{p}<.001$; satisfaction was negatively correlated with the program structure, $\underline{r}(52)$ = -.43, $\underline{p}<.001$, and responsibility attributed to faculty for problems, $\underline{r}(46)$ = -.41, $\underline{p}<.004$. Students attributed greater responsibility to

Table 1. Mean responses to survey questions assessing students' perceptions of graduate school, reported on nine-point bipolar scales.

Variable	Mean Response
Satisfaction with graduate school	5.82
Responsibility for problems attributed to self	4.81
Responsibility for problems attributed to faculty members	4.29
Responsibility for problems attributed to other students	2.93
Perceived control over outcomes	6.33
Frequency of interaction with faculty and students	6.78
Perceived evaluation of students by faculty	6.01

Table 2. Pearson correlation coefficients among survey responses assessing students' perceptions of graduate school.

	Satisfaction	Structure of program	Responsibility to self	Responsibility to faculty	Responsibility to students	Control	Interaction frequency	Evaluation by faculty
Satisfaction with graduate school		-.43*		-.41**		.50*	.56*	.59*
Amount of structure of program			.26****		.26****			
Responsibility for problems attributed to self					.30***			
Responsibility for problems attributed to faculty members					.29***	-.46*	-.23****	-.39**
Responsibility for problems attributed to other students								-.25****
Perceived control over outcomes							.33**	.49*
Frequency of interaction with faculty and students								.51*
Perceived evaluation of students by faculty								

*$p < .001$
**$p < .01$
***$p < .05$
****$p < .12$

faculty when they felt that they had little control over their success in graduate school, $r(46) = -.39$, $p < .05$, when faculty evaluations of students were reported to be low, $r(46) = -.46$, $p < .001$, and marginally with lower interaction among faculty and students, $r(48) = -.23$, $p < .12$). Perceived control correlated positively with the amount of interaction participants had with faculty and students, $r(55) = .33$, $p < .05$, and with positive evaluations of students by faculty, $r(55) = .49$, $p < .001$. Participants reported having more interactions with faculty and other students in their program when faculty had high evaluations of students in the program, $r(55) = .51$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

In general, graduate students report being more satisfied with their experiences in graduate school and having more control than was expected. This suggests that the graduate student role does not necessarily include feelings of dissatisfaction and lack of control. Furthermore, respondents felt that faculty evaluated them rather favorably and students were not more likely to attribute responsibility for problems to faculty than to themselves. Thus students do not see faculty as the "bad guys" of their graduate school situation.

However, specific hypotheses regarding associations among satisfaction, blame,and control were supported. Because attributions of responsibility involve attributions to problems, and not attributions to positive events, they are considered conceptually similar to blaming. Satisfaction and feelings of control were positively correlated; blame of faculty was negatively correlated with both satisfaction and control. Because these data are correlational, one cannot assess the causal directions of these associations. But all three variables are interrelated and the

processes among them are probably not unidirectional. Rather, there may be a circular feedback process in which satisfaction, control, and blaming others each influence one another (see Figure 1). Attributing responsibility to another person may lead to feelings of lack of control, which may lead to decreased satisfaction. Or low satisfaction may make one feel that one lacks control, which may, in turn, lead one to blame others for one's problems. Such a model is consistent with the learned helplessness analysis of depression in which feelings of lack of control over events and little perceived responsibility for one's problems (since situations are caused by others) lead to dissatisfaction with oneself and one's life (e.g., Abramson et al., 1975).

The present study suggests some factors that are associated with satisfaction and control. The amount of structure in a graduate program was negatively correlated with satisfaction. It was hypothesized that high structure might create feelings of low control and attributions of responsibility to faculty. However, since structure was not correlated with either variable, the factors mediating the association between structure and satisfaction are unknown.

Both control and satisfaction are correlated with two variables concerning the faculty-student relationship. The students' perception of how faculty evaluate them and the frequency of their interaction with other students and faculty are positively correlated with both control and satisfaction and negatively correlated with blame of faculty. These associations imply that the nature of the relationship between students and faculty may have a powerful impact on a student's feelings about graduate school. Again, of course, the causal direction of that association cannot be ascertained and it is probably somewhat circular (see Figure 2).

Attraction literature certainly supports the notion that people feel satisfied with a relationship when they feel they are being evaluated

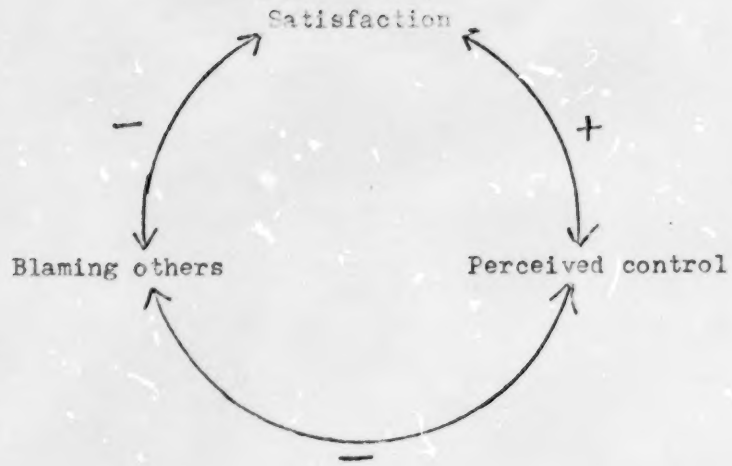

Figure 1. Circular model of associations among students' satisfaction with graduate school, perceptions of control, and blaming of faculty for problems.

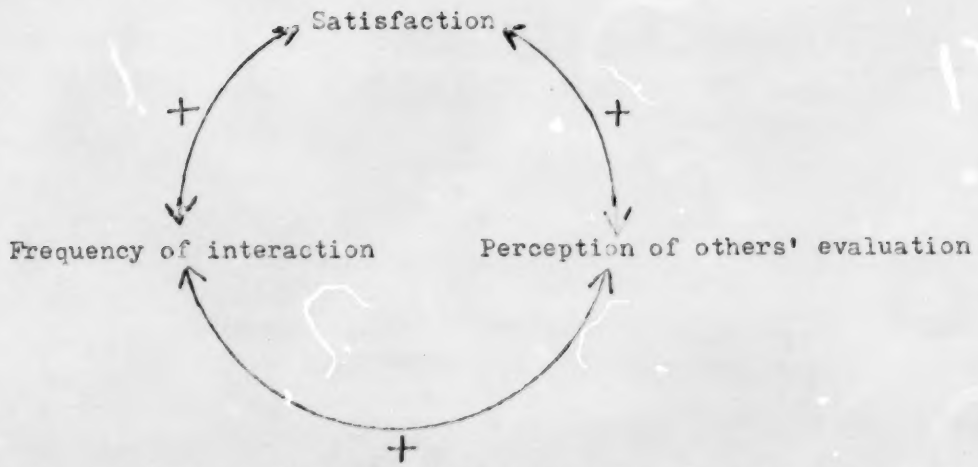

Figure 2. Circular model of associations among students' satisfaction with graduate school, perceptions of evaluation of students by faculty, and frequency of interaction with faculty and other students.

positively (e.g., Deutsch & Solomon, 1959). This satisfaction may lead to more frequent interaction, which could further enhance one's feeling of being evaluated favorably. Frequent interaction may lead to satisfaction, which, in turn, may lead to the belief that others are also satisfied with one's performance (e.g., Darley & Berscheid, 1967), which should encourage more frequent interaction.

Despite the correlational nature of these data, a circular model permits speculations regarding how to improve the graduate school experience, since any variable could be manipulated in the model. For instance, increasing the frequency of interaction among students and between students and faculty might enhance students' satisfaction and their perception of how faculty members evaluate them. Or, attempts by faculty to communicate a positive evaluation of students in general may enhance satisfaction and increase the frequency of interaction. Enhancing satisfaction itself in order to influence the other two variables would be more difficult without an assessment of other variables that are related to satisfaction. Program structure is one variable that was negatively correlated wih satisfaction and could be modified systematically; students' feelings of control might also be manipulated by giving students greater freedom to make decisions regarding their progress.

The present study thus provides evidence regarding both conceptual and practical issues. The research confirms the previously reported finding of a positive association between satisfaction and perceived control and of negative associations between blaming others and both control and satisfaction (Madden & Janoff-Bulman, in press). This study also suggests more specific factors which appear to influence students' satisfaction with graduate school: the frequency of interaction with other students and faculty, perceptions of how faculty evaluate students, and the amount of structure in a program.

Footnote

1. The sample of social psychology programs consisted of those at Stanford University, University of Pennsylvania, Rutgers University, University of Connecticut, University of North Carolina, University of Colorado, Corenell University, University of Texas, Duke University, University of Kansas, University of California at San Diego, Temple University, University of Maryland, Bowling Green State University, University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, University of Utah, Syracuse University, Northeastern University, Brandeis University, University of Miami, and Carnegie Mellon University.

References

Abramson, L., Seligman, M., & Teasdale, J. Learned helplessness in humans: critique and reformulation. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 1978, 87, 49-74.

Darley, J.M., & Berscheid, E. Increased liking as a result of the anticipation of personal contact. Human Relations, 1967, 20, 29-39.

Derry, S., & Brandenburg, D.C. Students' ratings of academic programs: a study of structural and discriminant validity. Journal of Educational Psychology, 1978, 70, 772-778.

Deutsch, M., & Solomon, L. Reactions to evaluations of others as influenced by self evaluations. Sociometry, 1959, 22, 93-112.

Federici, L., & Scheurger, J. Prediction of success in an Applied MA psychology program. Educational and Psychological Measurement, 1974, 34, 945-952.

Hackman, J.R., Wiggins, N., & Bass, A.R. Prediction of long-term success in doctoral work in psychology. Educational and Psychological Measurement, 1970, 30, 365-374.

Langer, E.J., & Rodin, J. The effects of choice and enhanced personal responsibility: a field experiment in an institutional setting. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1976, 34, 191-198.

Madden, M.E., & Janoff-Bulman, R. Blame, control, and marital satisfaction: wives' attributions for conflict in marriage. Journal of Marriage and the Family, in press.

O'Hare, M.W., & Grounds, L.M. Pre-lims, qualifying, specialty: an exam by any other name... *!#&%? Clinical Psychologist, 1978, 32, 13-14.

Rawls, J.R., Rawls, D.J., & Harrison, W.C. An investigation of success predictors in graduate school in psychology. Journal of Psychology, 1969, 72, 125-129.

Rossi, A. Transition to parenthood. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 1968, 30, 361-376.

Sime, M. Prediction of success in a master's degree program in nursing. Psychological Bulletin, 1978, 42, 779-783.

Walker, M.J. Clinical graduate students' views regarding training models. Clinical Psychologist, 1977, 30, 16-17.

Wiggins, W., Blackburn, M., & Hackman, J.R. Prediction of first year graduate success in psychology: peer ratings. Journal of Educational Research, 1969, 63, 81-85.

Willingham, W.W. Predicting success in graduate education. Science, 1974, 183, 273-278.

Wortman, C. B. Causal attribution and personal control. In J.H. Harvey, W.J. Ickes, & R.F. Kidd (Eds.), New directions in attribution research, (Volume 1). New York: Wiley, 1976.

Wortman, C.B., & Brehm, J.W. Response to uncontrollable outcomes: an integration of reactance theory and the learned helplessness model. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), Advances in experimental social psychology (Volume 8). New York: Academic Press, 1975.

Wortman, C.B., Panciera, L., Shusterman, L., & Hibscher, J. Attributions of causality and reactions to uncontrollable outcomes. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 1976, 12, 301-316.